

TWELVE

Chieftaincy Politics and the Explosion of the Anglophone (Ambazonian) Crisis in Cameroon

JUDE FOKWANG

This chapter is a continuation of my efforts to investigate and elaborate on the intercalary position of traditional rulers in Africa, specifically those in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon (Fokwang, 2005, 2009, 2011). Many scholars and activists continue to see traditional rulers as ‘decentralized despots’ (Mamdani, 1996) with little to offer other than acting as brokers for political capital between an unpopular centralized state machinery and a largely dispossessed rural peasantry (Fisiy, 1995; Jua, 1995). This seems to be the view of a growing number of young activists in Anglophone Cameroon who see no role for traditional authorities in a future democratic autonomous/semi-autonomous Southern Cameroons/Ambazonia, similar to aspirations expressed by activists against chiefly rule in rural South Africa during the final days of the apartheid era (Maloka, 1995, 1996). This chapter revisits Piet Konings’ (1999) seminal article, which, two decades ago, examined the thorny relationship between the Francophone-dominated regime of Paul Biya and traditional leaders in the Anglophone regions. In the wake of a separatist conflict raging in the Anglophone territories (now self-declared Ambazonia), it is worthwhile interrogating what positions chiefs have taken, prior to and during the explosion of the conflict. Are there insights in Konings’ article relevant to understanding today’s crisis? What has changed, and is there a role for traditional authorities in resolving the conflict?

What is the Anglophone Problem?

Contrary to claims in certain academic and political circles, national and international media that the Anglophone problem is essentially a language issue, it is simply stated, a political crisis occasioned by the postcolonial state’s failure to manage the relationship between its constituent parts — two former UN-Trust territories, the dominant section previously administered by France until 1960¹ and a smaller portion administered by Britain until

1 French Cameroon obtained its independence from France on 1st January 1960.

1961. On 1st October 1961, British Southern Cameroons obtained its independence, and both Cameroons jointly established a federation with limited constitutional guarantees to safeguard the sociocultural and political character of the territory previously administered by Britain and upon independence known as West Cameroon.² What has become known as the Anglophone problem initially emerged as far back as 1963 when Bernard Fonlon, a highly influential member of the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) raised concerns with Ahmadou Ahidjo about the growing marginalization of West Cameroonian leaders in decision-making processes within the Federal Republic.³ By 1966, Ahidjo's desire for a highly centralized political system was achieved when multiparty politics was abolished in favor of a one-party state. By 1972, the federation was crushed through a highly staged process supposedly to foster national unity between the Francophone and Anglophone portions of the country (Anyangwe, 2009; Chem-Langhèe, 1995; Konings & Nyamnjoh, 1997, 2003; Ndi, 2016). Renamed the United Republic of Cameroon after Ahidjo's so-called peaceful revolution, Paul Biya, Ahidjo's successor in 1982, later renamed the country by presidential decree in 1984 – as the Republic of Cameroon, an act many saw as the final straw against West Cameroon's political identity (also see Ndangam, 2020). It was upon the heels of this executive fiat that Fon Gorji Dinka, a traditional ruler and lawyer, called for the independence of the Republic of Ambazonia (the territory previously known as Southern Cameroons and later West Cameroon) in 1985 (Konings, 1999, p. 185). Thus, the Anglophone problem can be briefly summarized as follows: it is the real and perceived marginalization or state-sanctioned attempts by the Francophone-dominated ruling class to undermine three principal domains of West Cameroonian sociocultural and political heritage: the educational and legal systems as well as the ethos or what Anthony Ndi (2016, p. xxxv) has referred to as the Anglophone moral fiber. A brief examination of one of these domains may further clarify the proper context and understanding of what is meant by the “Anglophone Problem.”

Anglophone activists and intellectuals have protested against Francophone efforts to modify or undermine the Anglophone educational system dating as far back as 1983 when Paul Biya issued an executive order introducing French as a compulsory subject in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) without a corresponding requirement for English in Francophone exams (Konings, 1999, p. 184). Anglophone students, parents, and teachers later staged a prolonged struggle for the establishment of a GCE Board headed by a registrar, which was celebrated as a milestone in the preservation of Anglophone educational heritage (Nyamnjoh, 1996). Through another executive order in October 2018, Paul Biya eliminated the position of Registrar and converted the revered institution into a government parastatal⁴ – a move that has attracted widespread condemnation, especially in the wake of the military campaign by Biya's forces in the Anglophone regions of the country. A consortium of teachers' trade unions has protested the reorganization of the

2 Although Title X, Article 47 (1) of the Federal Constitution states that “Any proposal for the revision of the present Constitution which impairs the unity and integrity of the federation shall be inadmissible,” Ahmadou Ahidjo introduced a bill in 1972 seeking the dissolution of the federation (see (Ndi, 2016, p. xxxi).

3 Bernard Fonlon, (1964) *The Time is Now*, a secret memo addressed to Ahidjo.

4 See Presidential Decree No 2018/514 of 22 October 2018.

GCE Board as well as the fact that the decree clearly omits any references to “Anglophone” or the “Anglo-Saxon” character of the erstwhile board:⁵

The fact that the Board no longer organises only GCE examinations, that it now organises an Advanced Professional Certificate with the possibility that it might henceforth organise more, means that the name “GCE Board” no longer captures the essence of that body. A name like, the “Cameroon Anglophone Examination Board” or “the Cameroon Examination Board” will make more sense. We should make bold to point out, Your Excellency, that we see no reason why attempts are being made to obliterate the word “Anglophone” or the expression “Anglo-Saxon” from our context – these words do not appear even once in the new text, giving the impression that this text, presented as having been born of a well-meaning disposition, might after all have been driven by ulterior motives.⁶

Activists have continued to decry the fact that most institutions of higher education in the Anglophone regions are not only poorly equipped compared to similar institutions in Francophone Cameroon but also that a steady increase in the number of Francophone-enrolled students has contributed to the erosion of the so-called “Anglo-Saxon” standards at these institutions. Most importantly, the appointment of French-speaking lecturers to Anglophone universities with minimal mastery of the English language has exacerbated the situation, pitting Anglophone activists against the Francophone-dominated regime. These concerns prompted members of the Higher Teachers’ Trade Union (SYNES) at the University of Buea to join forces with the Anglophone Lawyers’ Association to lead a civic protest against the regime between 2015 and 2016.⁷ Their efforts culminated in forming the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) in 2016. The consortium operated for a couple of weeks, during which its leaders entered into negotiations with members of Biya’s government. Unexpectedly, the consortium was banned in January 2017, and its leaders were arrested and charged with treason, amongst other crimes.

What has become widely known within Cameroon and beyond as the Anglophone problem remains a major political challenge for the Francophone-dominated state. These issues have received significant intellectual scrutiny, and lately, more and more activists, politicians, and religious leaders have drawn attention to the plight of the Anglophone

5 Anglophone teachers slam Biya over GCE Board reorganization; <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/cameroonanglophone-teachers-slam-biya-over-gce-board-reorganisation/>; accessed 12 Nov, 2018.

6 A Memo Addressed to His Excellency the President and Head of State of the Republic of Cameroon, CATTU, PEATTU, CEWOTU, BATTUC, and TAC; undated Memo, published by *Journal du Cameroun*.

7 Anglophone lawyers issued several resolutions to Paul Biya amongst which they demanded that civil law magistrates (Francophones) be redeployed from Anglophone courts and common law practitioners transferred to common law courts (Anglophone Cameroon). These resolutions were widely supported by traditional rulers in both the South West and North West regions as well as journalists and the cross-section of civil society actors in both regions. See “After Gov’t Snubs Ultimatum, Anglophone Lawyers Begin Strike Oct 11” *Cameroon Postline*, October 11, 2016, <https://cameroonpostline.com/after-govt-snubs-ultimatum-anglophone-lawyers-begin-strike-oct-11/> accessed November 8, 2018.

minority in Cameroon (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 1997, 2003; Konings, 2005; Nyamnjoh, 1996; Ndi, 2016; Atanga, 1994; Eyoh, 1998). In the wake of widespread unrest in the Anglophone regions in November 2016, the Bishops of the Catholic Church in Anglophone Cameroon addressed a 12-page memo to Paul Biya in which they cataloged the plight of Anglophones dating to the ill-conceived Plebiscite that denied Southern Cameroonians the choice of complete independence.⁸ Whilst there is significant literature on Anglophone marginalization in socioeconomic, political, legal, and educational issues, there is relatively puny literature on the role of traditional authorities in the articulation/resolution of these concerns. This chapter is an attempt to fill that gap.

Chieftaincy and the Origins of the Anglophone Problem

Konings (1999, p. 189) contends that a full account of Anglophone struggles for autonomy would be incomplete without due credit to the role of chiefs, first, during campaigns for reunification and later federation in 1961. He credits, in particular, the role of Grasslands chiefs (known as Fons) in tilting the balance of the 1959 general elections in favor of the KNDP against the Kamerun National Convention (KNC) led by Dr. Emmanuel Mbella Lifafa Endeley. Whilst Dr. Endeley, an heir to the paramount chieftom of Buea, who had passed up the opportunity of becoming paramount chief in favor of studying medicine abroad, was generally portrayed by his political rival, John Ngu Foncha, as disrespectful of chieftaincy institutions. Hence, during the campaigns, Foncha and his associates' "main strategy was to portray the KNDP as a party that upheld traditional norms and symbols and the KNC as inimical to tradition and traditional rulers" (Konings, 1999, p. 191). The KNDP leaders "succeeded in winning over the powerful chief of Bali, the most educated among the North Western chiefs who used to be a strong KNC supporter" (Konings, 1999, p. 191). This chief was Galega II, paramount Fon of Bali Nyonga, who mobilized his peers in the Grasslands and the Coastal regions to support the KNDP platform. In fact, the campaign against Endeley's position to join the Nigerian federation was portrayed as so unfavorable to traditional rulers that many Bakweri chiefs, including the paramount ruler of Buea, Chief G.M. Endeley, joined the KNDP. Dr. Endeley unsuccessfully tried to replace these chiefs with those sympathetic to his political platform.

The KNDP eventually won the general elections of 1959 and proceeded to fulfill one of their election pledges, namely, the creation of the Southern Cameroons House of Chiefs in 1960 (Chem-Langh e, 1983, p. 672). Composed of 22 members, the House was divided into two categories: 4 ex-officio members and 18 elected members. The four ex-officio members were the paramount Fons of Kom, Bafut, Nso, and Bali (now classified as First Class Fons). The House's principal role was to advise the government, and should resolutions emerge from this body, the House of Assembly would debate them.

Following reunification and federation, the Southern Cameroons House of Chiefs became known as the West Cameroon House of Chiefs.⁹ It was a casualty of Ahidjo's

8 Memorandum Presented to the Head of State, His Excellency President Paul Biya, By the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda on the Current Situation of Unrest in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon, 22 December 2016, BAPEC/PRES/2016/30.

9 The Federal Constitution recognized and preserved the House of Chiefs although it did not elaborate on

so-called peaceful revolution when the federation was dismantled in 1972¹⁰ and a unitary state established, this, against the wishes of West Cameroonians.¹¹ With decree 77/245 of 15 July 1977, traditional chieftaincy institutions were reorganized and assigned the role of auxiliaries of the administration. Thus, commenced what Konings refers to as the “bureaucratization of chieftaincy” – that is, the state’s quest to align chieftaincy with state administration. One of the consequences of this bureaucratization is that the line between the modern state elite and chiefs has become blurred as both camps compete for pre-eminence as brokers between the central government and the local populations in their various regions or chiefdoms (also see Geschiere, 1993).

With the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1990, Paul Biya and his surrogates began courting traditional rulers in Anglophone Cameroon.¹² This was initially marked by the high-profile appointment of Fon Angwafor III of Mankon as the First Vice-President of the ruling Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) in 1990, following the resignation of John Ngu Foncha, who, ironically, had stepped down from this position on account of the marginalization of Anglophone Cameroonians.¹³ Following the launch of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) led by John Fru Ndi, traditional rulers, especially in the North West became divided into pro-CPDM, pro-opposition and supposedly neutral camps. Traditional rulers who were believed to be pro-CPDM in opposition strongholds were often targeted by their subjects or the general population as evidenced by the burning of Angwafor’s rest house in Bamenda and the temporary dethronement of Fon Galabe Doh Gah Gwanyin of Bali-Kumbat (Fokwang, 2009). These divisions were further ossified following the All Anglophone Conference (AAC) of 1993, in which a large delegation of chiefs participated. Later, the South West Chiefs’ Conference (SWECC) dissociated itself from the resolutions of the AAC. A similar attempt by several Northwestern chiefs led by Fon Angwafor III failed as he met strong opposition from traditional rulers sympathetic to the SDF.

Since the mid-1990s, traditional rulers in both the South West and North West regions have remained torn between further attempts at bureaucratization by the Francophone-dominated state¹⁴ and their efforts, real or perceived, in serving the interests of their subjects either as members of the ruling CPDM or by posing as neutral political actors (Fokwang,

their legislative role. See Title IX, Article 38 and Article 40 which stipulates that certain powers may be exercised in matters of legislation by the House of Chiefs.

10 In May 1972, “a presidential decree gave the House of Chiefs a maximum of six months to dissolve itself” (Chem-Langhèe, 1983, p. 673).

11 Ndi expresses surprise “how the entire Federal Republic of Cameroon could have been made to vote in the 1972 referendum over an issue which ten years previously, in February 1961 had involved only a fifth or 20% of the entire Federal Republic of Cameroon” (Ndi, 2016, p. xxxi).

12 Bolstered by his title as Fon of Fons – a title acquired upon his coronation by the Fons of the North West region in 1985, Paul Biya began to expect more from the Fons. They would be relied upon as vote-brokers for the CPDM’s dwindling status in the villages and towns in the North West and South West regions.

13 See Foncha’s resignation letter. Amongst other complaints, Foncha decried the fact that the people he had brought into the union had been frequently referred to as “the enemies in the house.” See Cameroon: Fragile State? *Africa Report* N°160 – 25 May 2010.

14 Since September 2013, traditional rulers in Cameroon are paid a salary from the public treasury, perceived and lauded by traditional leaders as the personal decision of the President, Paul Biya.

2009). Many of the traditional rulers have defended their membership in the CPDM as the most persuasive strategy to channel development funds and infrastructure to their chiefdoms and that, given the patrimonial character of the state (cf. Gabriel, 1999), highly coveted pieces of the “national cake” would only come to regions that demonstrate loyalty and support for the national government and the head of state. This partly accounts for the splits and in-fighting within and between members of SWECC and their North West counterparts, the North West Fons’ Union (NOWEFU).¹⁵ These divisions notwithstanding, both SWECC and NOWEFU have remained vocal in their call for the need to address the root causes of the Anglophone problem and for long-lasting solutions.

Chieftaincy and the Explosion of the Anglophone Problem

A few months leading up to the events that contributed to the explosion of the Anglophone problem, 248 chiefs in the South West region met under the banner of SWECC in Kumba and denounced the continued marginalization of Anglophones in Cameroon.¹⁶ Amongst their resolutions, they requested the head of state to respond to the lawyers’ ultimatum¹⁷ in order to save the unity of the country and to protect Anglophone institutions. The chiefs singled out the need to preserve the character of the Anglophone educational system: “SWECC humbly urges His Excellency Paul Biya, President of the Republic of Cameroon to urgently enact a law to preserve the distinct characteristics of the educational systems of Cameroon with particular attention to the Anglo-Saxon educational system of the English-speaking regions.”¹⁸ They also decried the predicament of Anglophone chieftaincy institutions which are “gradually being turned into a village civil service headed by the Divisional Officers” (SWECC Statement, 2015). The chiefs further called for criminalizing the neglect or non-treatment of English as an equal language in official government business.¹⁹

A few months after their proclamation on the Anglophone problem, SWECC members met again in February 2016 and, this time, paid homage to Paul Biya and his vision for the country even though the Biya government had addressed none of the items in their June 2015 resolution. SWECC, headed by Nfon V.E. Mukete, paramount ruler of the Bafaw

15 Francis Tim Mbom & Isidore Abah, SWECC Presidential Race Turns Hostile after NOWEFU Deadlock, *Cameroon Postline*, August 5, 2016; <https://cameroonpostline.com/swecc-presidential-race-turns-hostile-after-nowefu-deadlock/>; accessed Nov. 7, 2018. I should add that the NOWEFU is largely in disarray following a prolonged struggle for leadership within the association.

16 Ezieh Sylvanus, “SW Chiefs Back Anglophone Lawyers, Want Biya to Address Anglophone Banishment,” *Cameroon Daily Journal*, June 8, 2015.

17 See Bouddih Adams & Chris Mbunwe “After Gov’t Snubs Ultimatum, Anglophone Lawyers Begin Strike Oct 11” *Cameroon Postline*, October 11, 2016, <https://cameroonpostline.com/after-govt-snubs-ultimatum-anglophone-lawyers-begin-strike-oct-11/> accessed November 8, 2018.

18 A Statement by the South West Chiefs Conference on the Implementation of the 1996 Constitution Bearing on the Nature of the State and the Decentralization Process, June 6, 2015. Also note how the 2018 presidential decree on the reorganization of the GCE board has further undermined the “Anglophone” character of the board, something the chiefs would have denounced in light of their memo to the president in June 2015.

19 A bilingual commission has since been created and headed by former Prime Minister, Mafany Musonge. However, this has made little impact in terms of advocating for parity in the official use of English and French. Most official documents are released exclusively in French.

and appointed CPDM-senator, reiterated chiefs' roles as auxiliaries of the government and declared their partnership as one of mutual benefit for both the government and the peoples:

As custodians of traditions handed to us by our ancestors, and auxiliaries of the administration within our chiefdoms, even before these authorities were instituted, we do remind the State authorities not to forget so soon that we are, and, have always been, inseparable partners in nation building. They cannot do without the royal fathers who we are. Neither can we, in the present context of coexistence, also do without the administrative authorities. We are interdependent in a win-win partnership.²⁰

Given the tide of events in October 2016, which rapidly culminated in the explosion of the Anglophone problem, a preliminary assessment of the developments in Anglophone Cameroon since October 2016 reveals that the aspired “win-win partnership” between chiefs and government authorities echoed by Mukete has not materialized. Three broad developments are worth highlighting in this chapter: a) that the ongoing crises has left many traditional rulers vulnerable to violence at the hands of both government and separatist forces, b) the explosion of the crisis has exacerbated some of the divisions and contestations for power within chieftaincy associations and finally c) the escalation of the Anglophone crisis has provided further opportunity for some chiefs and their associations to assert their claims for legitimacy as “genuine” representatives of their peoples in their advocacy to state authorities to address the root causes of the conflict.

Violence Against Traditional Rulers

In the summer of 2018, the Fon of Bali, Ganyonga III, an appointed senator in the Cameroon parliament, feared for his safety and his family and arranged for their evacuation to a safe location outside the kingdom. Ganyonga's unexpected departure from Bali sent shockwaves among subjects in the kingdom and the Bali diaspora, including North America. As heir to the highly celebrated Galega II, and one of the few leaders classified as a “first-class Fon,” his departure was widely condemned by both his subjects and Anglophones in general.²¹

Soon after Ganyonga vacated his palace and sought refuge in Yaoundé, the Fon of Nso, another high-profile traditional ruler, was evacuated by a military helicopter on the pretext that he needed medical attention. Before his departure, he had refused to make any public statements as both government elite and separatist forces canvassed his support for their respective positions. Defenders of the Fon of Nso allege that one of his cousins, who

20 Maxcel Fokwen, “Nfon Mukete Rallies Southwest Chiefs to Support Biya”, *Cameroon Postline*, February 15, 2016; <https://cameroonpostline.com/nfon-mukete-rallies-southwest-chiefs-to-support-biya> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

21 Many see this as an abomination of sorts, given that the palace has never been vacated since the founding of the kingdom in the mid 19th century. On May 22, 2020 a video was issued by Ganyonga in which he stated that he had returned to the palace and that his doors were open to every subject interested in discussing the welfare of Bali.

had joined an Ambazonian separatist group, was determined to use the conflict to settle scores with the Fon. A rumor circulated on social media that the Fon had carried out a major sacrifice at which an unnamed virgin was killed, allegedly to neutralize the growing power of the Ambazonian fighters. Ambazonian fighters proceeded to avenge the death of the unnamed virgin by killing two of the Fon's sons and threatening his life as well. These events, his defenders contend, precipitated the Fon's evacuation from his kingdom.²²

Of the classified first-class kingdoms in the North West region, only the Fon of Kom and Bafut have maintained residency in their kingdoms. The Fon of Kom, for example, reportedly refused to meet with a visiting general of the Cameroon army and sought to know through an intermediary why soldiers had been deployed to his kingdom. As tensions increased in the lead-up to the October 7, 2018, presidential election, the Fon of Bafut was allegedly abducted by unidentified gunmen and later returned to his palace.²³ Government forces later stormed his palace, following a tip-off that he was allegedly providing a haven for separatist forces. Eventually, photos of the palace gates riddled with bullets were widely circulated on social media, and eyewitness accounts blamed the Cameroon military for the atrocities. The palace and a nearby museum were again looted by Cameroon soldiers in September 2019, this time attracting worldwide condemnation.²⁴ Earlier in the conflict, a widely circulated video on social media had shown the Fon of Bafut stating that as king, he would always side with his people against all outside forces:

This palace belongs to the Bafut people. If anyone has any worry of any sort, the palace is where he or she will run to. I am pleased that you people have assembled here this morning to state your grievances against the government of Cameroon. I am equally pleased that you have done this peacefully, without any destruction and without holding any weapons. The announcement I am making is that I have heard you people. I want to make it very clear that I am the Fon of Bafut and I will never betray the Bafut people.²⁵

Fons or chiefs in both Anglophone regions with less prestigious ranks have not been so lucky in the ongoing conflict. The Fon of Oku,²⁶ Sentieh II, for example, was kidnapped by separatist forces for his alleged close relationship with Philemon Yang, Cameroon's Prime Minister at the time.²⁷ His kidnappers submitted a long list of demands to the Prime

22 Joe Dinga Pefok, "Why Did Fons of Mankon, Bafut, Kom, Others Not Attend National Dialogue?" Oct 3, 2019, *Cameroon Postline*, <http://www.cameroonpostline.com/why-did-fons-of-mankon-bafut-kom-others-not-attend-national-dialogue/> accessed Nov 18, 2019.

23 "Fon of Bafut released after hours in captivity", September 5, 2018, *Journal du Cameroun*, <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/fon-bafut-released-hours-captivity/> accessed, Nov. 7, 2018.

24 See "Statement Concerning Destruction of Cultural Patrimony in Bafut" by the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA), 20 November 2019.

25 Translated from the Bafut by Neba N.

26 A small kingdom in Bui division of the North west region, hometown of the former Prime Minister, Philemon Yang.

27 "Cameroon: Separatists kidnap Fon of Oku", August 31, 2018, *Journal du Cameroun*,

Minister, amongst which they called for the withdrawal of Cameroon's forces from their land and for the Fon to apologize to his subjects for taking sides with powerful elites and the Cameroon state against his people.²⁸ The Fon was eventually released after ten days in captivity.²⁹

When the conflict took a turn for the worse in January 2018, many communities and traditional rulers became internally displaced persons. Since then, many citizens and traditional rulers have sought refuge in forests or remote areas.³⁰ Many traditional rulers report threats to their lives³¹ and many like Ganyonga of Bali have left their palaces for safer abodes. Dozens of chiefs in the Meme Division of the South West region, for instance, who themselves were living in hideouts, were requested by the local Francophone administrator to convince their subjects to leave their hideouts in the forests. Their sense of insecurity seemed justified, given the murder of a local chief in Ngongo Bakundu village in January 2018.³² At a meeting with local government administrators, the chiefs condemned the killings and burning but told the administrator that the task of trying to convince their subjects to come out of the forest was akin to a suicide mission.³³ The chiefs, conscious of the inability to exercise their powers as "auxiliaries of the administration," pressed instead for implementing the 1996 constitution, which requires the existing ten regions to be decentralized into semi-autonomous regions.

In July 2018, more news about kidnapped traditional rulers was reported in both print and social media. Eight chiefs were kidnapped in Buea, including Chief Njombe Njoke, 34, a second-class chief who was also vying for the presidency of SWECC.³⁴ He was recorded

<https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/cameroon-fon-oku-kidnapped/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

28 "Kidnappers present conditions to PM Yang to release Oku Fon", *Journal du Cameroun*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/kidnappers-present-conditions-pm-yang-release-oku-fon/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

29 "Cameroon: Fon of Oku released", September 9, 2018, *Journal du Cameroun* <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/cameroon-fon-oku-released/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

30 Over 600,000 people have become internally displaced. The UNCHR has recorded over 50,000 refugees in Nigeria and others have fled to Europe, the United States and Canada. Anglophone Cameroonian refugees make up a substantial number of persons who have been stuck in Mexico following President's Trump's policy to return all refugees to await the processing of their applications in Mexico.

31 Maxcel Fokwen, "Meme Chiefs to Petition Gov't Over Insecurity, Death Threats", *Cameroon Postline*, 19 January 2018, <https://cameroonpostline.com/meme-chiefs-to-petition-govt-over-insecurity-death-threats/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018. This followed the murder of Chief Johannes Ekebe Niongo of Ngongo Village on 12 January 2018 by unidentified gunmen. Also see "SW Chiefs, Minister Want Fleeing Anglophones Brought Back Home" *Cameroon Postline*, 6 April 2018, <https://cameroonpostline.com/sw-chiefs-minister-want-fleeing-anglophones-brought-back-home/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

32 Maxcel Fokwen, "Anglophone Crisis – Chiefs Remain in Hideouts Despite Asking Villagers to Come Out," *Cameroon Postline*, April 23, 2018, <https://cameroonpostline.com/anglophone-crisis-chiefs-remain-in-hideouts-despite-asking-villagers-to-come-out/>, accessed Nov. 7, 2018. Also see, Maxcel Fokwen, "Village Chief Shot Dead, Colleagues on-the-run," *Cameroon Postline*, 15 January 2018, <https://cameroonpostline.com/village-chief-shot-dead-colleagues-on-the-run/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

33 Maxcel Fokwen, "Gov't Orders Meme Chiefs to Bring Population Out of Forest," 9 April 2018, *Cameroon Postline* <https://cameroonpostline.com/govt-orders-meme-chiefs-to-bring-population-out-of-forest/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

34 Andrew Nsoseka, "Buea Chiefs Vamoose Following Abduction of Chief Njombe, Others," *Cameroon Postline*, July 17, 2018, <https://cameroonpostline.com/Buea-Chiefs-Vamoose-Following-Abduction-of-Chief-Njombe-Others/>, accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

in a widely circulated video in which he called for the cancellation of the presidential elections on account of the Anglophone problem:

The election now is not necessary. To me, it is premature because you cannot come to your house, the tap is bad, there is water all over your house and you start cleaning the carpet without first stopping the flow of water from the tap. So that election is uncalled for. The Ambazonia problem should first be resolved before they can think of any election.³⁵

Further reports of a kidnap included the chief of Bukari, a village in the kingdom of Bafut³⁶ and early in 2019, news was reported about the murder of the chief of Fuh village in Ndu subdivision by Cameroon soldiers. He was accused of leading a separatist group that operated in his chiefdom. Even the highly respected first-class chief of the Bafaw, Nfon Mukete, has not been spared by the conflict. One of his palaces in Konye was attacked and looted by the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF), one of the separatist groups seeking to defend the territorial borders of its self-declared state, Ambazonia.³⁷

Faced with threats to their lives, some chiefs in Meme Division, South West region, have resorted to altering their dress code in order to blend with those of the general population. Chiefs in this region of the country can be easily spotted with their uniquely decorated hats (often with cowrie shells), ivory necklaces, and “traditional” brooms. Because of their acute sense of insecurity, many chiefs have opted to move about hatless or to minimize, as much as possible, the sartorial and symbolic paraphernalia that tend to distinguish them from their subjects. Questioned about this trend, one of the chiefs responded thus:

Things have gone out of hand. We didn't expect this.... When people, for no reason, begin to target custodians of tradition, then, it means something has gone out of place in the society. Even enemies of some traditional rulers may want to use this current crisis to settle personal scores.³⁸

Evidently, these attacks are not “for no reason” and must be placed within the broader context of the evolution and politicization of chieftaincy in Anglophone Cameroon. It therefore begs the question, why are traditional rulers the subject of death threats, kidnap, and attacks?

A House Divided Against Itself: Chieftaincy and Elite Politics

A major consequence of the bureaucratization of chieftaincy is the proliferation of

35 “Gunmen kidnap eight Fako chiefs”, *Journal du Cameroun*, 7 July 2018

<https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/gunmen-kidnap-eight-fako-chiefs/> accessed Nov. 8, 2018.

36 “Gunmen kidnap traditional ruler in Bafut”, *Journal du Cameroun*, 20 July 2018,

<https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/gunmen-kidnap-traditional-ruler-bafut/> accessed, Nov. 7, 2018.

37 Maxcel Fokwen, “Fon Mukete’s Palace Attacked, Royal Artefacts Looted,” *Cameroon Postline*, 9 August 2018,

<https://cameroonpostline.com/fon-muketes-palace-attacked-royal-artefacts-looted/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

38 Maxcel Fokwen, “Anglophone Crisis Makes Chiefs to Stop Wearing Caps,” *Cameroon Postline*, 26 January

2018, <https://cameroonpostline.com/anglophone-crisis-makes-chiefs-to-stop-wearing-caps/>

chiefs' associations. In both Anglophone regions, chiefs are organized into divisional associations and then at regional levels. In the South West region, divisional chiefs' unions constitute the membership of SWECC, and in the North West region, NOWEFU remains the dominant chiefs' association, although it has recently been plagued by factional disputes between rival leaders.³⁹ I argue that these internal rivalries have undermined their quest for legitimacy both in the eyes of their subjects, the elites with whom they seek alliances, and ultimately with the state. It is precisely on account of their diminished legitimacy that their voices and efforts concerning the ongoing Anglophone revolts have gone largely unheeded.

The bureaucratization of chieftaincy in Cameroon has led to the crystallization of hierarchies amongst chiefs in Anglophone Cameroon. The 1977 chieftaincy decree ranks chiefs in terms of prestige from first-class to third-class chiefs. In the North West Region, for example, only four Fons are classified as first-class chiefs, and in the South West, four chiefs are ranked thus. This bureaucratization has led to contestations for power and primacy between the first-class Fons and hundreds of lesser-ranked chiefs. For instance, following the end of Nfon Victor Mukete's tenure as president of SWECC in 2016, Chief Njombe of Wokaka, Buea, was selected by a faction of chiefs in Fako as a potential candidate to succeed Mukete. Njombe's nomination triggered dissent within the ranks of some chiefs in Fako, many of whom objected to the fact that Njombe was a "third-class" chief and they would not entertain a chief of such low rank to run SWECC affairs, whereas there were more qualified first-class and second-class chiefs to replace Mukete.⁴⁰ Due to the Fako chiefs' inability to agree on a single candidate, SWECC floated the idea of giving the Manyu division the option of presenting a candidate to replace Mukete, but security challenges prevented them from convening. These disputes resulted in Mukete holding on to the office of SWECC president for two years, beyond the end of his tenure. Similar disputes led to him holding on to the position of president of the Meme Chiefs' Conference due to security challenges posed by the ongoing conflict.⁴¹

These associations have often aligned themselves very closely with regional elites, especially in the South West region, where the South West Elites' Association (SWELA) remains a powerful force in negotiating access to state resources (see Paul Nchoji Nkwi, 1997; W. G. Nkwi, 2006; Orock, 2013, 2015). Many of these associations are perceived as bodies whose primary functions, far from catering to the needs of their subjects, generally aim at coveting political and economic benefits for their members. By aligning themselves with elite politics, chiefs have also extended the politics of divide and rule initiated by successive colonial governments and, since independence, by Cameroon's Francophone-dominated regimes (Fokwang, 2019). The basic mechanism of divide and rule in Anglophone Cameroon

39 Isidore Abah, "North West Region: Atanga Nji tells Fons to down royal guns, sue for peace" *Journal du Cameroun*, 15 March 2018, <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/north-west-region-atanga-nji-tells-fons-royal-guns-sue-peace/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

40 Francis Tim Mbom & Isidore Abah, "SWECC Presidential Race Turns Hostile After NOWEFU Deadlock," *Cameroon Postline*, 5 August, 2016, <https://cameroonpostline.com/swecc-presidential-race-turns-hostile-after-nowefu-deadlock/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

41 Maxcel Fokwen, "Infighting, Anglophone Crisis Maintain Nfon Mukete as SWECC President," *Cameroon Postline*, 26 January 2018, <https://cameroonpostline.com/infighting-anglophone-crisis-maintain-nfon-mukete-as-swecc-president/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

consists of playing the North West region against its fellow English-speaking province, the South West, in matters of politics and infrastructural developments. Government appointments of personnel from one region often create the impression that this comes at the expense of potential technocrats from the other region, a mechanism that has been particularly salient with the appointment of Anglophone Prime Ministers.⁴² The case of the installation of a new Vice-Chancellor (a presidential appointment) may illustrate this point. Disheartened that the new Vice Chancellor, a member of the Iroko ethnic group in the Ndian Division, was replacing Nalova Lyonga, a member of the Bakweri ethnic group in the Fako Division, Fako chiefs boycotted the installation, despite an overwhelming attendance by other members of SWECC. Stunned by this boycott, one of the attendees sought to know what the Fako chiefs would have done if the incoming Vice Chancellor had been from the North West or a Francophone.⁴³ Chiefs are often fast to galvanize symbolic capital in favor of an appointed son or daughter to high office and to emphasize such kinship in ways that underscore the instrumentalist character of ethnic politics in Cameroon. Thus, amidst the escalation of the Anglophone crisis, members of the North West Fons' Union undertook a trip to Yaoundé in 2018 to celebrate the appointment of Paul Atanga Nji as the first Anglophone Minister of Territorial Administration – the same minister who has been tasked with crushing the Anglophone revolt.

Following the kidnap of the Divisional Officer (DO) for Momo Division in the North West region in February 2018, SWECC and SWELA dispatched a delegation to Batibo tasked with enlisting the support of Momo chiefs in the search for their kidnapped “son.” The abducted DO was reported to be from a remote area of the Ndian Division and was the first in his community to hold such an administrative post. Predictably, the chiefs’ efforts made no difference, and a new DO was appointed to replace the abducted one. Thus, chiefs and administrative officers have become victims in the ongoing crisis, raising major concerns about the ability of the former to serve as legitimate brokers between their subjects and the state. As auxiliaries of the administration, they are generally seen to be in cahoots with the Francophone-dominated state and, therefore, ill-placed to speak on behalf of their people. Despite this widely held opinion, traditional leaders, through their associations, have continued to voice concerns about the plight of their people, albeit with limited results. Hence, it is worth reviewing the mechanisms through which they have channeled their discontent and what results they have produced, if any.

Chiefs in the Corridors of Power

Following the dismantling of the West Cameroon House of Chiefs in 1972, traditional rulers in Anglophone Cameroon have had no constitutional role in the country other than the much-recited *auxiliaries of the administration*. The return to multiparty democracy in

42 See for instance the alternations between prime ministers from the South West and North West regions. In 2018, Philemon Yang from the North West region was replaced as prime minister by Joseph Dion Ngute from the South West region. This alternation also follows a long-standing principle initiated by Ahmadou Ahidjo known as regional balance (cf. P. N. Nkwi & Nyamnjoh, 1997).

43 Andrew Nsoeka, “Cracks Between SWECC, Fako Chiefs Widen,” *Cameroon Postline*, July 25, 2017, <https://cameroonpostline.com/cracks-between-swecc-fako-chiefs-widen/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

1990 also provided chiefs with a new platform to seek relevance as old political actors – despite widespread campaigns for chiefs to exercise neutrality (cf. Fokwang, 2009). Many of these chiefs opted to retain their membership in the CPDM, often at loggerheads with subjects who clamored for regime change by throwing their weight behind opposition parties like the SDF. The creation of the Cameroon Senate in 2013, as provided for in the 1996 constitution, saw the appointment of several traditional rulers from both the South West and North West regions of the country.⁴⁴ These appointments are widely believed to have benefitted the chiefs individually rather than their communities or subjects given their reluctance or inability to hold the government to account for the war it declared on the Anglophone populations. In this section, I review evidence of chiefs’ articulation of the Anglophone problem, prior to and following the escalation of the Anglophone revolts. Some of the areas in which chiefs have spoken out include the need to revisit the form of the state (that is, the root causes of the ongoing civil war), the need to address gross inequalities in the educational and legal systems as well as issues concerning infrastructural developments in the Anglophone regions.

As previously seen, South West chiefs delivered a very strongly worded statement in June 2015, backing the Anglophone Lawyers who had issued an ultimatum to Paul Biya to resolve the root causes of the Anglophone problem.⁴⁵ The nonchalance of the Biya government to the lawyers’ ultimatum provoked the escalation of the Ambazonian revolts.

Inspired by the Anglophone Bishops’ letter to President Biya in December 2016, the North West Fons’ Union (NOWEFU) submitted a similar memo to the President in which they documented what, in their view, traced the origins of the Anglophone problem and why – to use their metaphor - the festering wound had become cancerous. According to Fons, the origins of the Anglophone problem are traced to Ahidjo’s abolition of West Cameroon’s multiparty political system in 1966. According to them, this was quickly followed by the dismantling of the federal structure in 1972. The “illegal” abrogation of the 1961 Federal Constitutional provisions that safeguarded the status of the Anglophone minority in Francophone-dominated Cameroon remains a watershed moment in Cameroon’s political history. The Fons further argued that the government’s failure to “respect and implement some of the articles of the various Constitutions that uphold and safeguard what Anglophone Cameroonians came with into the union since February 1961”⁴⁶ has led to the “slow but sure destruction of the cultural identity as can be seen in [the] education

44 An exhaustive list of all traditional leaders in the Senate is currently unavailable. However, in an address to SWECC by the secretary general of the National Council of Traditional Rulers, Fon Chafah Isaac, stated that 19 members of the senate were traditional leaders, some of them elected and others appointed. 70 senate members are directly elected by their regions and 30 are nominated by the president, Paul Biya. Some of the prominent traditional leaders who were appointed in 2013 are: Nfon Mukete and Chief Anja Simon Onjwo from the South West region and Fon Doh Ganyonga III and Fon Teche Njei II from the North West region. See presidential decree No. 2013/149 of 8 May 2013 which details all 30 appointed senators.

45 Prior to this, South West chiefs in 2009 had threatened to lead a peaceful strike action due to the continued discrimination of Anglophones in Limbe. See Francis Tim Mbom, “Chiefs to Confront Biya on Anglophone Marginalisation” *Cameroon Post*, Monday, May 11, 2009.

46 The Plebiscite itself was held in February 1961 but the official date of Southern Cameroon’s independence was 1st October 1961. It remains unclear why the Fons identify the date of February 1961 as their point of origin.

and legal systems⁴⁷ in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country. Echoing their counterparts in SWECC, the Fons called for general amnesty to all arrested Anglophone protesters, the withdrawal of Francophones from Anglophone courts, and equity in the representation of Anglophones and Francophones in competitive examinations.⁴⁸

One of the traditional leaders who was consistent in his statements about the need to revisit the form of the state was Nfon Victor Mukete. In his submission during a senate debate on a bill concerning decentralization, Mukete advocated the view that only a return to federation and specifically a ten-state federation⁴⁹ would bring an end to the civil war that had engulfed the Anglophone regions:

The system has failed, federation is the only way. Ten states federation so each region can manage its affairs. Why are people afraid of federation? I am not talking like this because the country should be divided. No! I fought very hard for the reunification of Former Southern Cameroons and Former *La Republique du Cameroun*. And I can never destroy it. But the country should be federated. Look at America, South Africa, Switzerland, Nigeria, Canada, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Russia and Rwanda.... What is all these (sic) nonsense? My people are dying; they are suffering and we are playing games here in Yaoundé. We should be careful. I don't care. Go and tell anybody. Go and tell Paul [Biya]. Quote me anywhere.⁵⁰

In July 2017, members of SWECC also complained to the administration of the University of Buea concerning its admission policy. As the pioneer English-speaking university in the country, the University of Buea also admits French-speaking students who attend a short summer preparatory course in English after admission has already been granted. According to the chiefs and many other activists, the university's admission policy is partial to Francophone students at the expense of Anglophone students, who are often refused admission on the grounds that they failed the English Language subject in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) - Ordinary Level (OL). The chiefs recommended

47 North West Fons' Union Memo to President Biya

48 Yerima Kini Nsom, February 13, 2017, Issues at Stake: The Fons' Voice of Reason, *Cameroon Postline*; <https://comeroonpostline.com/issues-at-stake-the-fons-voice-of-reason/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

49 Whilst some, like Mukete and SWECC have advocated a ten-state federation as a solution to the crisis, others have advocated a return to the two-state federation as it were in 1961. There is no consensus amongst chiefs as to what sort of federation would be ideal for Anglophones. None of the chiefs have publicly supported the separatists' efforts to seek complete autonomy from the Cameroon Republic.

50 Mukete also granted an interview to the legendary French-language magazine *Jeune Afrique* in which in reiterated his call for a ten-state federation. In a rare admission, he also suggested that the creation of the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism, set up in January 2017 had come a little too late. He further stated that "None of the different English-speaking prime ministers in this country has ever been sufficiently honest or courageous to sound the warning bells and try to limit frustrations." "Ten-State Federation is solution to Anglophone crisis - Chief Mukete" *Journal du Cameroun*, February 19, 2018; <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/ten-state-federation-solution-anglophone-crisis-chief-mukete/>, accessed May 28, 2020. Also see "Cameroon: Will parliament finally discuss Anglophone problem?" *Journal du Cameroun*, 10 June 2019 <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/cameroon-will-parliament-finally-discuss-anglophone-problem/> accessed May 28, 2020.

that Anglophones seeking admission with an English Language pass at the GCE should be granted the same opportunity as Francophones in the summer preparatory course.⁵¹ A few months after the chiefs' request, the University of Buea revised its admission policy with respect to the status of the English Language in the GCE. In preparation for the 2017-2018 academic year, the university put out a statement encouraging Anglophone applicants, including those who had not obtained a pass in the English Language at the GCE Ordinary Level, to submit their applications for admission to the University of Buea.⁵²

One of the central issues of the Anglophone problem concerns the gross neglect in developing the regions' infrastructure, especially in the South West region from where a substantial amount of the country's GDP is extracted.⁵³ One of these infrastructural projects is the promised Limbe Deep Seaport, whose status has been pending for over two decades. In the wake of the Anglophone revolts, chiefs from the city of Limbe headed by Otto Molungu submitted a memo to the government in which they requested the immediate construction of the promised seaport – as a show of good faith if indeed the government were interested in resolving the Anglophone problem.⁵⁴ The chiefs further requested that English be the exclusive language of instruction in government-run professional schools in the English-speaking regions.⁵⁵ Currently, French is the exclusive language of instruction in all four government professional schools in the South West region. Besides the chiefs of Limbe, many other chieftaincy associations, especially in the South West, have continued to put out statements calling for a general amnesty to separatist forces and, subsequently, for an all-inclusive dialogue.⁵⁶ Along with elites from their respective divisions or regions,

51 Andrew Nsoseka, "SW Chiefs Decry Anglophone Marginalisation in UB," *Cameroon Postline*, 21 July 2017; <https://cameroonpostline.com/sw-chiefs-decry-anglophone-marginalisation-in-ub/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

52 However, applicants would be "expected to sit and pass an English Proficiency Test which will be organised by the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, at a cost." Andrew Nsoseka, "Following SWECC's Criticism, UB Adjusts Discriminatory Admission Rules," *Cameroon Postline*, 28 October 2017, <https://cameroonpostline.com/following-sweccs-criticism-ub-adjusts-discriminatory-admission-rules/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018.

53 The region is host to SONARA and the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) that traces its origins to German agro-industrial development in the 19th century (Konings, 2003). Whatever remained of the CDC prior to the civil war has been largely decimated.

54 On May 5th, Paul Biya signed decree No. 2020/249 reorganizing the Limbe sea port. It remains uncertain what this development will mean for Anglophones or citizens of Limbe specifically.

55 Francis Tim Mbom & Erna Mouyeme, "Anglophone Crisis Solution: Limbe Chiefs Want Immediate Construction of Seaport" *Cameroon Postline*, 20 October 2017, <https://cameroonpostline.com/anglophone-crisis-solution-limbe-chiefs-want-immediate-construction-of-seaport/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018. The creation of the Bilingual Commission in January 2017 has hardly achieved anything in the promotion of the equality of both English and French in the conduct of government business – itself a demonstration that the Anglophone problem is far from being just a linguistic problem.

56 Andrew Nsoseka, "Manyu Chiefs, Elite Appeal for General Amnesty, Urgent Dialogue" *Cameroon Postline*, 18 June 2018, <https://cameroonpostline.com/manyu-chiefs-elite-appeal-for-general-amnesty-urgent-dialogue/> accessed Nov. 7, 2018. Following repeated calls by the international community for an inclusive dialogue, the Cameroon government staged a national dialogue without first declaring a cease-fire. Although it supposedly brought citizens from all over the country to Yaoundé between September 30 and Oct 4, 2019, the event was largely attended by what some have referred to as IDP-Fons – that is, traditional rulers who were already living in exile, far from their chiefdoms. Also see Joe Dinga Pefok, "Why Did Fons of Mankon, Bafut, Kom, Others Not Attend National Dialogue?" Oct 3, 2019, *Cameroon Postline*, <http://www.cameroonpostline.com/why-did-fons-of-mankon-bafut-kom-others-not-attend-national-dialogue/> accessed Nov 18, 2019.

such demands have largely gone unheeded, including a carefully stage-managed National Dialogue that took place without key members representing Ambazonian/Anglophone interests. Regrettably, the Cameroon government seems determined to resolve a political crisis by military means.

Conclusion

This chapter has built on and extended Konings' (1999) findings on the role of chieftaincy in the struggles for Anglophone autonomy in Cameroon. It has examined, in particular, the situation of chiefs and their associations prior to and during the insurgency that continues to wreak havoc in most of the countryside in the Anglophone territories. The chapter reveals that traditional rulers have been the target of violence perpetrated by both the Cameroon military and separatist forces. That local chiefs have been killed, kidnapped, and their properties looted is far from new. What we see today is an increase in the scale and gravity with which such violence is meted out to chiefs, especially those associated with the Francophone-dominated regime. Chiefs have been kidnapped in Buea, Oku, and Bafut while others have fled their palaces, as in Bali and Nso, or killed, as seen in the case of a chief in Kumba and the fon of Fuh village in the Ndu subdivision. Why these attacks, especially in the North West region where chiefs commanded considerable reverence?

One may read these attacks in two ways: first, as a continued diagnostic of the intercalary position of chiefs since they became compromised by the colonizing project (cf. Fallers, 1960). Since the dismantling of the House of Chiefs in 1972, traditional rulers have seen their powers continuously eroded, thanks to their cooptation as "auxiliaries" of an overwhelmingly unpopular Francophone-dominated regime. The ongoing conflict and the fact that they are targeted indexes their marginal position within the hierarchy of postcolonial power, but they also represent a state that has lost relevance in the eyes of the masses. More and more young people are acutely disconnected from chieftaincy institutions whose role they see as mainly self-serving. The politicization of culture or custom has further dealt a heavy blow to the image of those who claim to be the guardians of tradition, given that chiefs are seen to be in cahoots with the elites (see, for example, the Fon of Oku's supposed alliance with the then prime minister, Philemon Yang), or are perceived to be seeking elite status themselves through senate appointments, board membership in government institutions and parastatals. The fact that many of the senatorial appointees from the Anglophone regions are traditional rulers further underscores the view that these traditional rulers have been fully captured by and are serving the interests of the Francophone-dominated elite rather than their subjects.

The above argument may be buttressed by a cursory examination of the relationship between Fon Ganyonga III of Bali Nyonga and his subjects – a relationship that has been strained since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1990 (Fokwang, 2009). However, things took a turn for the worse following Ganyonga's appointment to the Cameroon Senate as a member of the CPDM. Prior to the eruption of the conflict, the kingdom's most celebrated festival – Lela – had not been held for several years. Richard Fardon (2006) contends that Lela could be understood as a "barometer of the state of play in Bali politics: a ceremony that has adjusted to reflect the changing composition and external

relations of the community” (2006, p. 2). This argument could be extended as follows: Lela’s absence over several consecutive years could also index the state of politics – one that shows the growing dissonance between the ruled and the rulers (Fokwang, 2020). This growing dissonance became even more apparent in the council and senatorial election of 2013 when the Fon and the Bali traditional council allegedly enlisted the powers of a revered Bali cult known as the Voma – aimed at coercing his subjects to vote in favor of the ruling CPDM. Remarkably, the Fon also became one of the first traditional rulers to flee his palace once separatist forces established themselves in the kingdom. That chiefs and their allies are attacked by their subjects speaks to the fact that they are perceived to have aligned themselves with elites whose self-serving pursuits have brought nothing but turmoil and further dispossession to the masses.

A second reading of these attacks against traditional rulers falls within the scope of what I refer to as *symbolic dethronement*. Symbolic dethronement operates in two ways – by demystifying the sacred powers of the chiefs through their abduction and by exercising the threat of violence that results in chiefs “downgrading” their dress forms in order to blend in with those of ordinary people. Big men could easily be replaced once their fortunes declined in the precolonial horticultural communities of the forest and coastal lands (Chem-Langhëe, 1983). These decentralized communities had no patience with individuals who failed to meet society’s expectations – either in their generosity or ability to mediate in conflict situations. Village members would simply switch allegiance to a new big man. In the Grasslands, chiefs could be dethroned by members of the regulatory society, variously known as Kwifo or Ngumba. These mechanisms for checking the excesses of traditional rulers have all but disappeared, leaving many of them convinced about their invincibility, especially when backed by the brutal power of the postcolonial state. In this sense, Mahmood Mamdani refers to chiefs as *decentralized despots* (Mamdani, 1996) – partly in the sense that they drew their authority initially from the colonial state and now from the postcolonial state. Thus, when young people scorn or refuse these chiefs’ directives, they actively resist an institution that has increasingly lost its legitimacy. Here, it is important to emphasize that in contemporary times, few people distinguish between the institution and its office-bearer. In the eyes of many, a despotic ruler undermines the legitimacy of the institution as young people grapple with finding solutions that meet their present needs. It is also against this backdrop that chieftaincy has come to be associated with the things of the “old” rather than as a forward-looking institution. Here, we see parallels with the violent backlash that confronted chiefs in rural South Africa during the final years of apartheid (Fokwang, 2009; Oomen, 2000, 2002, 2005; van Kessel & Oomen, 1997) - when most chiefs were accused of having been lackeys of successive apartheid regimes and that they had no relevance in a post-apartheid democratic dispensation.

If we consider that many traditional rulers are alienated from their subjects, are themselves the target of both symbolic and physical violence, and their associations in disarray, it becomes comprehensible why their memos, open letters, and ultimatums to government authorities often fall on deaf ears. I argue that the internal squabbles that plague chiefs’ unions or associations have prevented them from acting decisively as the Anglophone problem erupted into civil war. It is the rare case that their recommendations are considered

(such as in the admission policy at the University of Buea).⁵⁷ The record is replete with chieftaincy rivalries: first, to occupy offices within their respective associations; to seek relevance in a patrimonial state where allegiance to the state and its functionaries supposedly ensures access to resources and finally; to build alliances with their elites or upstage them in their jostling for power and influence. Hence, chieftaincy politics have not only failed to be decisive in seeking solutions to the Anglophone problem but rather, are widely believed to have exacerbated the problem prior to and during the conflict.

This chapter argues that traditional rulers have not only failed in playing a mediatory role during the conflict but that their track record of aligning themselves with the Francophone-dominated state has largely alienated them from their subjects and the masses in general – a fact that leaves them too tarnished to serve as neutral or trustworthy brokers. Evidently, a semi-autonomous or autonomous Anglophone state would have a constitutional role for chiefs akin to the House of Chiefs prior to its dissolution in 1972. Thus, chiefs, irrespective of their political affiliations, must recognize that they stand to gain as much as their subjects should a negotiated settlement on this conflict be achieved. Chiefs are not only stakeholders in the political process but must galvanize forces within their ranks to act decisively on behalf of their people. This, I contend, would enable them to regain legitimacy and make a case for the relevance of chieftaincy in the 21st century.

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